

To Roswell Field
with sincere regards
from Bliss Carman

Sappho: Lyrics

BY BLISS CARMAN

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With Excerpts from a Literal Rendering by H. T. Wharton

I

*Delicate Adonis is dying, Cytherea; what shall we do?
Beat your breasts, maidens, and rend your tunics.*

WHAT shall we do, Aphrodite?
Lovely Adonis is dying.
Ah, but we mourn him!

Will he return when the Autumn
Purple the earth, and the sunlight
Sleeps in the vineyard?

Will he return when the Winter
Huddles the sheep, and Orion
Goes to his hunting?

Ah, for thy beauty, Adonis,
With the soft springs and the South wind,
Love and desire!

II

"WHO was Athis?" men shall ask,
When the world is old, and time
Has accomplished without haste
The strange destiny of men.

Haply in that far-off age
One shall find these silver songs
With their human freight, and guess
What a lover Sappho was.

III

I loved thee once, Atthis, long ago.

I LOVED thee, Atthis, in the long ago,
 When the great oleanders were in flower
 In the broad herded meadows full of sun.
 And we would often at the fall of dusk
 Wander together by the silver stream,
 When the soft grass-heads were all wet with dew
 And purple misted in the fading light.
 And joy I knew and sorrow at thy voice,
 And the superb magnificence of love,—
 The loneliness that saddens solitude,
 And the sweet speech that makes it durable,—
 The bitter longing and the keen desire,
 The sweet companionship through quiet days
 In the slow ample beauty of the world,
 And the unutterable glad release
 Within the temple of the holy night.
 O Atthis, how I loved thee long ago
 In that fair perished summer by the sea.

IV

*The moon has set, and the Pleiades; it is midnight, the
 time is going by, and I sleep alone.*

O NCE you lay upon my bosom,
 While the long blue-silver moonlight
 Walked the plain, with that pure passion
 All your own.

Now the moon is gone, the Pleiades
 Gone, the dead of night is going,
 Slips the hour, and on my bed
 I lie alone.

V

S OFTLY the first step of twilight
 Falls on the darkening dial,
 One by one kindle the lights
 In Mitylene.

Noises are hushed in the courtyard,
The busy day is departing,
Children are called from their games,—
Herds from their grazing.

And from the deep-shadowed angles
Comes the soft murmur of lovers,
Then through the quiet of dusk
Bright, sudden laughter.

From the hushed street, through the portal
Where soon my lover will enter,
Comes the pure strain of a flute
Tender with passion.

Sleep thou in the bosom of thy tender girl-friend.

SLEEP thou in the bosom
Of the tender comrade,
While the living water
Whispers in the well-run,
And the oleanders
Glimmer in the moonlight.

Soon, ah, soon the shy birds
Will be at their fluting,
And the morning planet
Rise above the garden;
For there is a measure
Set to all things mortal.

VII

*And round about the breeze murmurs cool through apple boughs,
and slumber streams from quivering leaves.*

I N the apple boughs the coolness
Murmurs, and the gray leaves flicker
Where sleep wanders.

In this garden all the hot noon
I await thy fluttering footfall
Through the twilight.

VIII

And golden pulse grew on the shores.

I'T was summer when I found you
In the meadow long ago,
And the golden vetch was growing
By the shore.

Did we falter when love took us
With a gust of great desire?
Does the barley bid the wind wait
In his course?

IX

Men, I think, will remember us even hereafter.

WILL not men remember us
In the days to come hereafter,—
Thy warm-colored loving beauty
And my love for thee?

Thou, the hyacinth that grows
By a quiet-running river;
I, the watery reflection
And the broken gleam.

X

AND thou seaborne Aphrodite,
In whose beneficent keeping
Earth with her infinite beauty,
Color and fashion and fragrance,
Glows like a flower with fervor
Where woods are vernal.

Touch with thy lips and enkindle
Thy moon-white delicate body,
Drench with the dew of enchantment
This mortal one, that I also
Grow to the measure of beauty
Fleet yet eternal.

XI

LOVE, let the wind cry on the dark mountain,
 Bending the ash trees and the tall hemlocks,
 With the great voice of thunderous legions,
 How I adore thee.

Let the hoarse torrent in the blue canyon,
 Murmuring mightily out of the gray mist
 Of primal chaos, cease not proclaiming
 How I adore thee.

Let the long rhythm of crunching rollers,
 Breaking and bellowing on the white seaboard,
 Titan and tireless, tell while the world stands,
 How I adore thee.

Love, let the clear call of the tree-cricket,
 Frailest of creatures, green as the young grass,
 Mark with his trilling resonant bell-note,
 How I adore thee.

Let the glad lark song over the meadow,—
 That melting lyric of molten silver,—
 Be for a signal to listening mortals,
 How I adore thee.

But more than all sounds, surer, serener,
 Fuller with passion and exultation,
 Let the hushed whisper in thine own heart say,
 How I adore thee.

XII

NOW to please my little friend
I must make these songs of spring,
With the soft southwest wind in them
And the marsh-notes of the frogs.

I must take a gold-bound pipe,
And outmatch the bubbling call
From the beechwoods in the twilight,
From the meadows in the rain.

XIII

OVER the wheat field, over the hill-crest,
Swoops and is gone the beat of a wild wing,
Brushing the pine-tops, bending the poppies,
Hurrying Northward with golden summer.

What premonition, O purple swallow,
Told thee the happy hour of migration?
Hark! On the threshold, (Hush, flurried heart in me!)
Was there a footfall? Did no one enter?

Soon will a shepherd in rugged Dacia,
Folding his gentle ewes in the twilight,
Lifting a level gaze from the sheepfold,
Say to his fellow, "Lo, it is springtime."

This very hour in Mitylene,
Will not a young girl say to her lover,
Lifting her moonwhite arms to enlace him.
Ere the glad sigh comes, "Lo, it is lovetime!"

XIV

HEART of mine, if all the altars
Of the ages stood before me,
Not one pure enough nor sacred
Could I find to lay this white white
Rose of love upon.

I who am not great enough to
Love thee with this mortal body
So impassionate with ardor,
But, oh, not too small to worship
While the sun shall shine,—

I would build a fragrant temple
To thee in the dark green forest,
Of red cedar and fine sandal,
And there love thee with sweet service
All my whole life long.

I would freshen it with flowers,
And the piney hill wind through it
Should be sweetened with soft fervors
Of small prayers in gentle language
Thou wouldst smile to hear.

And a tinkling Eastern wind-bell,
With its fluttering inscription,
From the rafters with bronze music
Should retard the quiet fleeting
Of uncounted hours.

And my hero, while so human,
Should be even as the gods are,
In that shrine of utter gladness,
With the tranquil stars above it,
And the sea below.

XV

NEVER yet, love, in earth's lifetime
Hath any cunningest minstrel
Told the one seventh of wisdom,
Ravishment, ecstasy, transport,
Hid in the hue of the hyacinth's
Purple in springtime.

Not in the lyre of Orpheus,
Not in the songs of Musæus,
Lurked the unfathomed bewitchment
Wrought by the wind in the grasses,
Held by the rote of the sea-surf,
In early summer.

Only to exquisite lovers,
Fashioned for beauty's fulfilment,
Mated as rhythm to reed-stop,
Whence the wild music is moulded,
Ever appears the full measure
Of the world's wonder.

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